

Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa* – an enigma

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Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa* remains something of an enigma. Its similarity to other species, most notably Singing Bush Lark *Mirafra cantillans*, has presumably led to its being overlooked; however its call is distinctive, very obvious and far-carrying. This note principally seeks to alert observers to its possible presence, in order that they may be able to add significantly to our knowledge of the species. It should occur in some of the areas visited by birdwatching tourists, although is unrecorded by them. Nobody knows, for example, whether or not it is endangered or vulnerable, nobody has ever found it breeding and indeed rather few people have even seen it at all.

The species was described in 1930 by Herbert Friedmann¹ from a specimen collected in southern Shoa Province of Ethiopia by E.A. Mearns in May 1912. Three birds (an adult and two young individuals) were also collected by the same expedition near Archer's Post in northern Kenya and described originally as *Mirafra candida*². It is now generally agreed that these taxa are conspecific. The species was then lost until the early 1970s when single birds killed themselves against the walls of Ngulia Safari Lodge in Tsavo West National Park in December 1972 and November 1974, and were collected by the Ngulia ringing team.

I lived in Tsavo East National Park for just over two years from late 1974 and during that time saw, or more correctly heard, a lark fairly regularly which was not in any of the books available to me. Although very similar to Singing Bush Lark it had a 'song' totally unlike that species and it occurred in rather different habitat, it preferring areas with quite thick grass (relatively rare in Tsavo East National Park) with some bushes and/or small trees present. The call was a characteristic and very far-carrying *boo-ee-oo* with emphasis on the second part (almost *buwee-oo* at times). My records were in December or January, in and immediately after the short rains, and again in April. I had no records during the dry season. This was not just that it was not singing, as I had no records of any lark resembling the species at that time. For the period of my stay in Tsavo I retained records of this 'species' on the basis of its song. About a week before I left, the then warden, Tony Carn, collected one in order to prove that it was indeed *Mirafra pulpa*. For a full description of the bird and more details of my records at this time see Lack³.

Since then, there has been one further bird caught and ringed at the lights of Ngulia, in December 1978. A bird tape-recorded by Rowland McVicker at Kiboko, near the north-west corner of Tsavo East in June 1974 has been confirmed as the species⁴. During the next 15 years there were several claims, from parts of northern Kenya in particular, but none have been substantiated, and several of those initially accepted in East African Bird Reports have subsequently been withdrawn by the observers concerned. It was also looked for regularly in Tsavo, but without success, until December 1992, when the Ngulia ringers found up to c150 birds in a small area near Kilaguni Lodge in Tsavo West National Park⁴. The birds were singing and displaying although no concrete evidence of breeding was found.

Subsequent to this, the only records I am aware of are the following. In September 1994, Neil Baker photographed one in Mkomazi Game Reserve in northern Tanzania. My own visit to Mkomazi in July–August 1993 failed to produce the species, but when I returned in December 1995, I heard the characteristic song on four mornings. In two and a half weeks in the reserve I recorded at least ten individuals in three separate locations, one with seven individuals in earshot at once. Subsequently, Neil Baker has recorded it again in Mkomazi in March 1996.

So what is its status? The short answer is that nobody really knows. It is clearly not a common bird anywhere and may warrant classification in one of the rare and endangered categories of Red Data books, but as so little is known it is difficult to be sure.

Most records are from the Tsavo area of south-east Kenya and extending into northern Tanzania, and from December, January and April. As three have now been attracted to the lights of Ngulia Safari Lodge, it would appear that it is principally a migrant, arriving in the Tsavo area for the rainy season. However, the two records in June and September indicate that at least some birds appear to remain for the dry season. The lack of records from Tsavo East in the dry season may be due to habitat requirements. During the rainy season in Tsavo East the preferred conditions are met in several places but as the grass dries out and disappears for the dry season, the area becomes much less suitable for the species. Mkomazi and Kiboko are situated in areas with higher rainfall and may therefore have enough grass to sustain it through other seasons. However, the species remains very difficult

to distinguish in the field when not calling. Zimmerman *et al* note that it is richer-coloured than the sympatric Singing Bush Lark and with more heavy streaking on the upperparts, rather less prominent white superciliary stripe, and usually more reddish brown central tail feathers (not greyish brown or sepia). Also Singing Bush Lark prefers more open habitat and does not need bushes or trees.

Birders are requested to search for the species and report all possible sightings. The call should be easy to pick out, and once learnt is not forgotten. Don't forget to have your bedroom window open either, as it often sings at night, especially with a full moon!

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